



LOCAL TV NEWS IGNORES LOCAL AND STATE CAMPAIGNS

Presidential Race Sucks Up Most of the Media Oxygen; Coverage Is Mainly Strategy and Horserace

Twice as Much Campaign Advertising as Campaign Journalism in Battleground States

More Sports and Weather, and More Crime, Than Election News

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A study of 44 television stations in 11 media markets has found that a viewer of local news would see fewer than three minutes of campaign coverage per half hour of evening news, on average, but just over four minutes of paid political advertising aired during the same half-hours.

In the seven markets in presidential battleground states included in the study, a half-hour of local news averaged just over three minutes of campaign journalism, but almost six minutes of campaign advertising. In the four markets that are not presidential battlegrounds, a half-hour of local news averaged just over two minutes of campaign journalism and just under a minute and a half of campaign advertising.

The findings – released by the Lear Center Local News Archive, a collaboration between the USC Annenberg School’s Norman Lear Center and the Department of Political Science’s NewsLab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison – result from an analysis of all evening news coverage (5:00 pm to 11:30 pm) aired in 11 markets by local ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox stations from October 4 through October 10, 2004. This ongoing study is designed to present a comprehensive picture of prime-time campaign coverage by local news stations, the main source of information for a large majority of Americans.

Researchers analyzed 435 hours of regularly-scheduled local news broadcasts. Based on analysis of the total time devoted to various news elements, a composite half-hour looks like this:

- advertising: 8 minutes
- sports and weather: 6.4 minutes
- crime: 2.5 minutes
- other (celebrity, science, education, arts, etc.): 2.5 minutes

- election coverage: 2.4 minutes
- local interest: 2.1 minutes
- teasers, bumpers, intros: 1.6 minutes
- health: 1.5 minutes
- business, economy: 1.3 minutes
- unintentional injury: 0.9 minutes
- Iraq, foreign policy: 0.5 minutes
- non-campaign government news: 0.4 minutes

The Presidential race dominated local news coverage. Nearly eight out of ten of the campaign stories captured by the study focused on the presidential or vice presidential candidates. By contrast, only five percent of all stories were about local elections. The vast majority of these local stories were about races for the U.S. House of Representatives, which comprised three percent of all stories. Seven percent of all stories were about voting issues, such as absentee ballot information and polling places. Just two percent of all stories focused on ballot initiatives or bond referenda.

Eight out of the 11 markets in the study had a U.S. Senate race to cover. Coverage of the presidential race also dominated election coverage in these markets, with 75 percent of the stories in these eight markets focusing on the presidential race. Of these eight markets, four were considered toss-ups. Yet even in those markets with a highly competitive Senate race, 68 percent of the stories focused on the presidential race.

Almost half (45 percent) focused on campaign strategy or the horserace. Fewer than one in three (just 29 percent) focused on campaign issues, and a grand total of nine stories (only 0.7 percent of the stories) analyzed and critiqued campaign advertising. Strategy and horserace coverage also dominated the presidential/vice presidential stories. Slightly more than half of the stories about the presidential or vice presidential candidates were about strategy or horserace, and just 29 percent focused on issues. Stories about non-presidential candidates and races were somewhat more likely to focus on campaign issues instead of campaign strategy. Forty-two percent of these stories focused on strategy or horserace, and 29 percent were issue-based.

Presidential and non-presidential debates were the most frequent topic of local news coverage. Almost half of all stories mentioned a debate in some way. Sixty-three percent of all stories about the presidential/vice presidential race mentioned a debate. Forty-seven percent of the stories focused on a Senate race mentioned a debate. This was not the case for stories about House elections, where debates were mentioned just 22 percent of the time.

But mentioning a debate doesn't mean that a story will focus on campaign issues. Of stories where a debate was mentioned, 60 percent focused on strategy or horserace, and only 25 percent were focused on issues. ("Mentioning" a debate does not mean that the story focused exclusively on the debate.)

There were 1,279 campaign stories in the sample, with an average length per story of 81 seconds. Of those stories, just 466 (36 percent) contained any soundbites from candidates. These 466 stories average just over three soundbites per story. The average length of a soundbite was just 11.6 seconds.

Regularly-scheduled news programs are not the only way that local stations provide election information. The most obvious alternative format is coverage of debates. The 44 stations

in our sample devoted a combined total of nearly 126 hours to broadcasting debates, such as the vice-presidential and the second presidential debate, which aired during the sample period. In other words, coverage of the debates accounted for slightly more than four times the total amount of election coverage that aired during regularly scheduled news programs.

In addition to airing the debates, local news stations also aired a variety of town hall meetings, election-based talk shows and other types of campaign-related programming. The 44 stations in our sample aired a total of 27 hours and two minutes of this type of election programming.

Seven of the 11 markets in the study are in presidential battleground states. The average amount of news coverage per news broadcast in these markets was 39 seconds more than the average in non-battleground states. Interestingly, a slightly lower percentage of the overall coverage in battleground states focused on the presidential race compared to non-battleground states. Seventy-five percent of the stories in battleground states focused on the presidential race, while 81 percent of the stories in non-battleground states were focused on the presidential race. In addition, the breakdown of strategy and horserace coverage is slightly different in battleground and non-battleground markets. In battleground states, 47 percent of the stories focused on strategy or horserace, and 28 percent focused on issues. In non-battleground states, 44 percent of the stories focused on strategy or horserace, and 32 percent focused on issues.

The owners of 20 out of 44 stations in the sample have pledged to provide “free air time” to candidates during the 2004 campaign season. A comparison between these stations and those that did not sign the pledge shows that the “free air time” stations did in fact provide more campaign coverage. These stations averaged six minutes and 10 seconds per night over the course of the week. The station not signing the pledge averaged five minutes and 34 seconds per night.

Interestingly, the free air time stations did not provide more issue-focused coverage. Forty-six percent of the stories airing on those 20 stations focused on strategy or the horserace, and 29 percent centered on issues. The stations that did not take the pledge did slightly better, with 44 percent of their stories focused on strategy or horserace, and 31 percent focused on issues.

All of the stories analyzed are available at the Lear Center Local News Archive [localnewsarchive.org]. This unique resource allows registered users to search the story database on several key variables, such as story frame, length of story, media market and date stories aired. In addition, users will be able to search the database for individual candidate soundbites. The archive was created in partnership with the information technology firm CommIT Technology Solutions, Inc. [commitonline.com].

Principal investigators on the project, which is funded by the Joyce Foundation [joycefdn.org] are Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and director of the Norman Lear Center; Ken Goldstein, political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he also directs the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project; and Matthew Hale, assistant professor in the Center for Public Service at Seton Hall University.

Data for this study come from 11 markets; New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Dallas, Seattle, Miami, Denver, Orlando, Tampa, Dayton and Des Moines. The television content for this project was captured through a sophisticated market-based media server technology. Media

servers, located physically in each of the markets, electronically capture television news programming between 5:00 pm and 11:30 pm every evening and divide it into 30 minute segments of digitally recorded video. These segments from each day's worth of captured programming are sent over the internet to the University of Wisconsin NewsLab servers overnight.

Once the recorded programming is transferred from each of the media markets via Web to the NewsLab servers, the InfoSite online software systems developed by CommIT take over. There are two distinct but interrelated InfoSite systems: the Clipping System and the Coding System. Both systems include video interface, which allow for seamless integration of digitized video with the custom online data entry tools. Broadcasts and news stories can be viewed on a continuous loop, but the system also includes the ability to stop, rewind or fast-forward for maximum efficiency. Using the Clipping System, the 30 minute segments are divided into news and non-news programming, and all election-related content is tagged. Election-related news stories are sent to the Coding System, where coders enter a variety of information about each story, including length, candidates covered, focus and length of candidate soundbites. Both InfoSite systems include thorough validation checks, which do not allow questions to be left unanswered and ensure that question answers are logically consistent. NewsLab staff log and encode over 2,000 hours of digital video a week, roughly 300 hours a day.

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. Based at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. The impact of entertainment on news is a principal focus of the Lear Center. For more information, visit [learcenter.org].

The Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin has consistently been ranked in the top ten political science departments in the country. It is currently home to another major project on political communication in America, the Wisconsin Advertising Project [polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising]. This project gathers and analyzes political advertising from the country's top 100 markets and has become the major source of information for journalists, policy makers, and scholars on the volume and tone of political advertising.

Located in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, the USC Annenberg School for Communication [annenberg.usc.edu] is among the nation's leading institutions devoted to the study of journalism and communication, and their impact on politics, culture and society. With an enrollment of more than 1,700 graduate and undergraduate students, USC Annenberg offers B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in journalism, communication, and public relations.

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